



Robert Bresson

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Robert Bresson

Bresson has been acclaimed as the greatest living master of cinema; he has also been accused of practicing a kind of mystic anticinema. His reputation, in any case, is worldwide, and his new film, PICKPOCKET, will command careful attention wherever it is shown. Bresson has made only five films previously: LES AFFAIRES PUBLIQUES (1934), which has completely disappeared; LES ANGES DU PECHÉ (1943); LES DAMES DU BOIS DE BOULOGNE (1945), LE JOURNAL D'UN, CURÉ DE CAMPAGNE (1950), and UN CONDAMNÉ À MORT S'EST ECHAPPÉ (1956).

Marjorie Greene saw M. Bresson several times in Paris in January; quotations not otherwise identified in the following article are taken from her conversations with him.

Robert Bresson's *Pickpocket* begins quickly. Credits, in severe gothic letters on the regulation black-and-white screen, disappear in seconds. Suddenly, you are motionless, caught with the impact of the simple beauty and incredible perfection of the discovery of Michel, the pickpocket.

Bresson's camera—a continuously, imperceptibly moving camera—finds Michel at a race track as he watches hands transferring money and tabs his victim. He appears as he is—a man poorly made for a normally moral circumstance. He looks uneasy. He is suspect. He is apart. And he is with you every moment—even when you do not see him.

Michel is plagued with the restlessness of the man unmotivated except toward a debasing obsession. He moves always, afraid of his separate existence, circling in a dreary rut: from, to, up, down, out, in—his destinations the poor room in which he lives with his few possessions, or the “open market” where he plies his trade. He is not safe or comfortable in either. In a fleeting transformation in his face or in a transient glimpse of his eyes, you feel his consuming desire to use his pickpocket's hands with the skill of a magician—but not for the money in the wallet or the value of the watch.

The doubts which beset Michel do not prevent his thievery. And he has doubts, latent, bursting forth in a rare moment of sorrow as he kneels in prayer at his mother's funeral and wonders how her life will be judged. Or in a tense moment with Jeanne, who loves him, and he finds she knows him as a thief. Or in his refusal to treat Jacques, his friend who wants to reform him, with other than impatience and contempt. Or, and perhaps more than any other, in his relationship with a hovering police inspector with whom he debates the question of the value of his life, his right to live as he wishes.

Only that which permits us to discover Michel is shown. We know nothing of Michel's former life. There are no “neighborhoods” to which we can attach him. Those who touch his life trail no other identification except as they are shown: friend Jacques, “ma mère,” the questioning detective, Jeanne, the girl whose fate it is to love him.

The precisely effective, constant medium shots, relieved only when the camera moves in for the detail of an intricate hand movement, are part of this control. The swift pace of the film, so many times using a “waiting” frame pregnant with suspense, participates in Michel's revelation.





Martin Lassalle in PICKPOCKET.

When the film is over, you have experienced another human being. You may have found him cold, unfeeling. You may not believe in his redemption through the love of Jeanne—and, again, this may not be important. You may not have become passionately involved in his problem—but you *know* him. His very thoughts have been unveiled to you. Yours has been an incredible—almost miraculous—motion picture experience. Michel has come to you totally. You may not know how.

A great many who talk about Bresson and write about him use the term “mystic,” perhaps, and logically, trying to find the proper category for the uncommon sensitivity with which he collects the qualities of the cinema into a communion—an intimate rapport—with a man’s inner self.

One reviewer (so many have written so much!) says: “A Robert Bresson film is not a collection of tricks: gray walls, low skies, immobile faces, abstract dialogue; it is, on the contrary, one of the most extraordinary of existing cinematographic languages: the perfect meeting of form and substance, of the written word and thought.”*

Asked about mysticism, Bresson has answered: “I do not know what you mean by mysticism.”† Of the cinematographic language

he has said simply, implying that this should be assumed: “At the moment, I am more occupied with the special language of the cinema than with the subject of my films.”

For Bresson, this language begins and ends with the director. *Pickpocket* is his entirely. One step beyond *Un Condamné à Mort S’est Echappé*, he conceived the idea. He wrote the script, accumulated the cast and crew, directed it, selected music, supervised the editing.

He works alone. He needs no advisors, no assistance except in the technical operation of a production unit. All decisions are his. The final result is an expression of himself. No one else has participated creatively except himself.

For this, Bresson conquered the “unconquerable”: the dissident, illusive, distorting, problem element of the film—the actor. This conquest is reverberating around the motion picture world in a delayed reaction pattern, distributing shock, willing disbelief, and uneasy curiosity. This, even serious film students tend to say, is merely a personality, a style; or Bresson is a genius with a method; or this is no concept, nothing historical for film except that it represents the artistic achievements of a talented man.

Examine this.

“There is no art—if the cinema must be an art,” Bresson says, “there is no art without transformation. There is no art where the things which you use to express yourself do not change when you put them together. The film ought to be a perpetual transformation of all its elements in contact with each other. All these elements must change. These changes give the film its life.

“It is not the characters (or actors) that give life to the film, but the film which gives life to the characters (or actors).

“I do not want the actor to express himself. What he gives me, he gives me without knowing. It is I who must express myself. I photograph things that might be nothing or next to nothing in themselves—and which become something only in relationship to what is next to them—like a color blending with another color.

“From the first moment I arrived at the studio to make my first film, I felt about profes-

* Claude Choublier, “Robert Bresson ou de l’idée fixe,” *France Observateur*, December 24, 1957.

† “Propos de Robert Bresson,” *Cahiers du Cinéma*, October 1957. The following three quotations also came from this source.

sional actors exactly as I do now. 'If they are going to act like this,' I said to myself, 'there is no film at all. I cannot make a film.'"

As a director—a term which he decries for himself—Bresson controls the actor much as he controls the sound, or the camera movement: he gets what he needs. No more.

This control begins with the selection. He does not use professionals.

"An actor, and especially a talented one, can no more be himself," Bresson says. "He must be another. This brings about an odd circumstance: this apparatus, which is the camera, takes everything . . . that is to say, it takes the actor who is himself and another at the same time . . . there is phoniness . . . the result is not true. Through the cinema you must make contact only with those things which are true—and you are profoundly touched with these very subtle truths."

Beyond using the nonprofessional, Bresson selects for his principals those having a strong "moral" resemblance to the characters in his films. This takes an intuitive sense, Bresson admits. He has to feel himself that the person is right, but he does not take chances. After selection he "lives" with them for quite a time, studying movements, gestures, listening to them talking in the flattened tone which for him as a director is mandatory. Of François Leterrier, the young philosophy student who played Fontaine in *Un Condamné* he says ". . . before the shooting we saw and conversed with each other every day, and I was sure that I had not made a mistake, that I had found in him the person or character that I searched for. This [contact] continued for a long time."

"The cinema is not a show," he says, "it is a kind of 'scripture' through which one tries to express himself in the face of terrible difficulties, because there are so many things between yourself and the screen. You must move mountains . . . chains of mountains to get to the point of self-expression. But you cannot change the inner nature of the principal character; an authentic expression is one thing that you are not able to invent; to capture it, is an admirable achievement . . ."

This means, of course, that Bresson cannot use the same individuals again. Almost a legend is the story of Claude Laydu, the aspiring young actor who was the tortured little priest in *Journal d'un Curé de Campagne*. "Will you use him again?" Bresson was asked. "No," he replied. "How can I? For *Journal* I robbed him of what I needed to make the film. How could I rob him twice?"

Provided Bresson has not erred in the selection of his principal character—and for a given film he goes through the same process for all important characters in the story—his film-making will then give him great joy, the fulfilling joy that the artist in him cries out for when he is idle, and he says: "I want to make another film. My joy is in *making the film*."

"I set out on a road," he says of film-making. "I do not look for things. I find them. It is in that moment of discovery that I rejoice."*

It is from the total submission of the man to the medium that art results—art of the highest order. For the man has let himself be immersed, because this immersion frees his own extraordinary abilities. He discovers, he says, because he is intuitive, he sees instinctively. Originality, sensitivity, the "stuff" of art—are spawned only in the exceptional intellect. The "moving audio-visual" which is the film is an exploratory mechanism, its creativity limited only by the mind which uses it. Bresson says:

". . . that which is beautiful in a film, that which I look for is the movement toward the unknown. The audience must feel that I go toward the unknown, that I do not know in advance what will happen. I do not know this because *I do not know the depth of my character*, although I have chosen him with as much precaution as possible. It is marvelous to discover a man gradually, and it is to this degree that one progresses in a film, instead of knowing in advance what will come to pass, the result . . . which, in fact, would be only the false personality of an actor. In a film, there must be this

* René Guyonnet, "Entretien Robert Bresson," *L'Express*, December 17, 1959.

sense of discovery of a man, of a profound discovery . . . the thing given is nature, man; it is *not* the actor. It is necessary to return to nature: you must search always, you must have at your disposal the means to keep on searching.”*

This concept of discovery suggests the “non-preconception” of Robert Flaherty. It may also suggest the approach of the neorealists who take life as they find it. It does, of course, suggest immediately the probing cameras of documentary film-makers — the non-propagandists. But it goes beyond any of these, because Bresson is concerned with the one element of film-making which has eluded “discovery”—the “inner man.” Flaherty, the “neorealists,” the documentary film-makers work with the exterior man, photographing him as he appears. Bresson seeks to discover what this exterior can tell him about the man—how he is “constructed inside.”

How?

His work with his principal character calls for interminable rehearsal. He has to arrive both in movement and voice-tone at a certain level of “automation.” This, because he believes that body-movement, words spoken and reactions to them are in fact in the daily routine of living for the most part, “automatic.” “I may,” he explains, “have my character walk to a desk and place a book on it for as many as 10, 20, 30, 40 times. When I see what I want, when he gives me what I want—this tiny glimpse of him—I take it. With the voice, it is the same. I will have him read—just read for me—until I have the tone, the flattened tone I desire. During the filming, he does not know what he gives me.” (Claude Laydu, the priest in *Journal*, was said to be shocked when he saw the saintly figure he had become on the screen.)

“You see,” Bresson continues, “it is yet not so much the words he says or the movements he makes which are important. It is what they provoke. That constitutes the ‘essence’ of the film.”

How does the interpreter feel under this regimen? When Leterrier was asked this question, he replied: “Quite frankly, I had the feel-

ing of being very much circumscribed, totally directed.”

“This is not difficult to understand,” Bresson countered. “I try to arrive at the truth by way of some mechanical way, if you wish. This feeling that Leterrier had of being maneuvered by me is due to this mechanical way without which it is not possible to arrive at that which lies beyond the truth, namely himself.”*

And again he says: “Perhaps, during the filming this feeling that [the interpreters] might have (but they have not) of being treated as objects, comes from the fact that I prevent them from ‘exteriorizing’. What I am trying to capture is not what they *show* me, but what they *conceal* from me, that which is marvelous, unique: their personalities.”†

This admittedly mechanical use of the non-professional to permit total expression by the film author is perhaps the most controversial of Bresson’s film concepts. It would not, naturally, be popular with actors. He has been obliged to insist, time and again: “I have nothing against actors. In fact, I am always amazed by their extraordinary performances in the theater. But the film is not the theater.”

Even those who do not write kindly of *Pick-pocket* find it a faultless film technically. It is impressive in its perfection: exquisite framing, beautifully clear images, camera angles as precise and effects as subtle as Bresson’s own mind. The rhythm of the film is so skillfully enmeshed in the over-all impression of the film itself that it is not identifiable as rhythm.

“I know what I want—in all elements of the film,” says Bresson. “I ask for it. I ask for it from those who work with me in a technical capacity.”

But each element is his—his alone.

He reviews the rushes—first with the crew (but not the cast), and then alone. It is when he is alone that the decisions on the day’s shooting and necessary re-takes are made, to be announced when shooting begins again.

* *Cahiers du Cinéma*, October 1957, *op. cit.*

* Both quotations from *Cahiers du Cinéma*, October 1957, *op. cit.*

† René Guyonnet, *op. cit.*

When the shooting is over and editing begins, Bresson occupies the cutting room. He alone knows what he is looking for as he views the footage sequence by sequence. "It is characteristic of M. Bresson," says Raymond Lamy, the very proficient editor of *Un Condamné* and *Pickpocket*, "that he works until he has what he wants. He does not begin with any preconceived notion—he is "discovering" as he edits—but you may be sure that whatever pleases him will be right."

Bresson edits each sequence within itself, until all are edited. If a sequence does not give the effect he wishes as it is placed with others, he takes them apart and starts over again.

Dubbing and mixing sessions receive his constant attention. Every element of the film is vital to him—and sound especially. Each sound he uses must contribute to the transformation he must have. One of the most brilliant examples of his use of sound is in *Un Condamné* when each sound heard stirs, or excites, or moves in some way. He does not use the sounds as he finds them on location, or on a studio set. In a room, for instance, if there are to be noises of conversation, doors opening, and closing, a clock ticking, a baby crying, he must record each separately. The result is an endless number of sound tracks to be used thereafter as he sees fit.

Music for Bresson is never background. It is for a purpose selected by him. In *Un Condamné* he uses the somber, beautiful strains of Mozart to accompany the daily march of the prisoners carrying their waste cans from their cells to the cesspool for dumping. How close this came to the ridiculous! But it worked, and brilliantly. "You see," Bresson explains, "this is an example of what I mean by transformation: when things come together. This music lifted this scene to another level. It is not possible now to think of those men without remembering their dignity, and they were dirty, ragged and dishevelled."

It is a tribute to Bresson's great perception and sensitivity, to the profound inquiries which drive him to astounding discovery, that his films provoke sometimes unexplainable emotions and impressions. They are so completely an expres-



UN CONDAMNÉ À MORT S'EST ECHAPPÉ

sion of himself that his own inner nature is exposed.

"I am after the truth," he says. And again, "My interpreters must have a moral resemblance to the character in my film." And again, "I discover."

When asked if in *Un Condamné* there was not to be found extraordinary praise of the perseverance of faith, his answer was: "This praise is not the subject, but follows from the subject. . . . I put very simply a certain man in a certain danger and I followed him closely with my camera. The important thing, more than the facts or the events, was this man whom these facts and events permitted me to portray."*

"Was this man in *Un Condamné* predestined?"
"Aren't we all?"

"The mysticism which many of us see in your film, have you put it there, or is it there in spite of you, or it is your opinion that it is not there?"

" . . . I do not believe that everything in a film is put there. You include some things without including them. What you call my mysticism must derive from this. In *Un Condamné* (as the subtitle indicates: "The Wind Blows Where It Will") I tried to make the audience feel these extraordinary currents which existed in the German prisons during the Resistance, the presence of something or someone unseen: a hand that directs all."†

Bresson lives on the Seine across a footbridge

* René Guyonnet, *op. cit.*

† *Cahiers du Cinéma*, *op. cit.*



LES DAMES DU BOIS DE BOULOGNE

the words he uses to express himself. His English is excellent, but he insists that it is not adequate—and this because he feels it inadequate to the business of expressing himself as rapidly as he thinks, and as he does in his own language.

You are left free to listen, to watch, and try to understand. You see the sorrow he feels in the tragic death of Albert Camus, who was his friend. Again, you stare fascinated as he strikes a match with the expert toss of a match box, and see his fleeting pleased smile. Or you listen as he expresses disgust with every aspect of the film except that of making the film. This he loves. It is easy to see why.

For all that is seen and heard, there is so much about him that is not understood. Perhaps it is the genius given to so few; the important objectivity, the precise mind, the power of perception, the ability to unveil.

Bresson says of himself, as he comments on the narration he had read in *Figaro Littéraire* of *Un Condamné*:

" . . . I remember that it affected me as something of great beauty; it was written in an extremely precise tone, very cold, and even the structure of the narration was very beautiful. It had great beauty. There was at the same time that coldness and simplicity, by means of which one senses that it is the work of a man who writes with his heart. This is something very rare. . . ."

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"You were a painter once, M. Bresson."

"I *am* a painter," he said. "I will always be a painter. But I had to stop. When I had to stop I had to fill up an emptiness."



from Notre Dame, on the curved tip of the Ile St. Louis, in one of the oldest, loveliest spots in Paris. It is easy to imagine the ghosts of Pascal, the Jansenist, referred to so often by those who discuss Bresson, and of Montaigne, whom he himself loves to re-read and quote, haunting the cobblestone quay. He lives with austere elegance. A part of his house is a large room overlooking the Seine, in which he seems to spend much of his time. When one looks at it, it is so much his that it is impossible to conceive of it being any other way. The walls and high ceilings, white and bare; tall bookcases along the fireplace wall packed with rows of books; a rough-hewn madonna and child on the mantel, reflected in a mirror framed in an intricately woven design; ivory coverings on the lovely period chairs and sofa—a warm, comfortable room.

Bresson is free in this room—free to pace and talk. And you are left free to accept his kindness, his eagerness to give; to follow his movements and his words. His eyes are young, younger than his face. His whole aspect is that of a handsome man, unaware that he is so. Although he talks easily, sometimes rapidly with enthusiasm or impatience, he is impatient with

* *Cahiers du Cinéma*, *op cit.*